

Best books of 2019, part 1

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Body

Choosing the best non-fiction books of 2019 was chaotic, very much like the year itself. So don't read these all at once. In 2020, take your time. Next week: art and (mostly) fiction.

"Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men," by Caroline Criado Perez. The British journalist wrote the book of the year, a true stunner that turns the way we see the world upside down. With a blast of stats, she shows us a world designed for males and male bodies, male schedules and male comfort, including medication, car seats, bar stools, sidewalks, scientific studies, writing style, the arts canon, hand tools, clothing size and design, public toilets, public spaces, indoor temperatures, work hours, spacesuits, dry-cleaning prices, brick size, skin sensors, dust masks, body armour, pianos, airplane headrests, medical diagnosis, drug trials, human compartmentalization and more. "Follow the money" is the truism but "follow the stats" reveals a world profoundly hostile to half its population.

"Permanent Record," by Edward Snowden. Who is Snowden? One of the most important recorders of the way we live now, a modern Martin Luther, he never wanted to talk about his private life, only the U.S. corporate-government destruction of all private life. Yes, everything private thing you write, say and do is tracked. Snowden relates, possibly involuntarily, the roots of his belief in candour, privacy, good government and what decency requires: that one blow up one's life and likely die young, far from home. The people who change the world are always different in some crucial way. He was highly intelligent and inventive, as were many geeks in the security industry, but had been raised by civilized parents and had a strong sense of fairness. He was disinclined to obey.

"The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming," by David Wallace-Wells. "It is worse, much worse, than you think" is Wallace-Wells' first line. It goes downhill from there. There have been five mass extinctions on Earth, "all but the one that killed the dinosaurs involved climate change produced by greenhouse gas." One was 250 million years ago. With this one, he writes, more than half of the carbon exhaled by burning fossil fuels appeared in the last three decades. Anyone who is 30 and over is complicit, not that it matters. What matters is what we do now. The Earth does not care about us. It will adapt to what we did after we vanish, along with the Anthropocene era. The great thing about this recitation of doom is its calmness. Wallace-Wells is not riding through town at midnight screaming "the heat is coming, the heat is coming." The heat has come. Read this and prepare.

"Guest House for Young Widows: Among the Women of ISIS," by Azadeh Moaveni. The reaction to the Western women who left civilized life and travelled far to serve ISIS has been understandably irate, if not vicious. Nobody wants the men back, irretrievably violent as they are presumed to be. But there are children, who have young mothers, and what of them? Moaveni interviewed 13 of these women at length and discovered the gender gap in running away from home, whether it was Tunis, Frankfurt or Walthamstow, the densest Muslim enclave in London. Indoctrinated by religion, some were sincere in wanting a righteous life. Others sought adventure and purpose. If it is troubling to see teenage girls eager to sacrifice for men, it is mystifying to hear of their affection for the indescribably violent ISIS cult.

"Horizon," by Barry Lopez. The American environmentalist, traveller and author of the remarkable "Arctic Dreams," exalted for his life's work exploring this beloved, lonely, unknowable planet, has written what may be his final book. He visits six regions including the Galapagos, the Kenyan desert and the ice shelves of Antarctica, and writes so well that one is lifted into a kind of trance. "Some days I watched as pearly opalescence bathed an entire cloud. The interior of an abalone shell, mounted in the sky." I had always wondered why Lopez preferred landscape to humans. A shocking and uncharacteristic personal essay on his boyhood, peopled by cold-blooded parents and a strange priest, offers a sinister explanation. The Earth, you see, does not prey on children.

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